

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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Perennials can be propagated by several methods

by Jim May

As warm, dry weather persists into the fall and with a warm winter predicted across Virginia, now is a good time to divide perennials. Temperatures won't be the critical factor in the success or failure of dividing and replanting this year; water will. So, before you get out the garden spade, make sure everything is well watered before digging and make sure you can commit to keeping all plants watered through the winter.

The popularity of perennials continues to grow and many people want to know how they can start their own plants. Like annuals, perennials can be grown from seed, but that takes a while. They can be propagated much more quickly from divisions, stem cuttings and root cuttings. Raising plants by division or cuttings has the advantage that the new plant will be an exact replica of the parent plant, which is not always true with plants raised from seed.

Division Most perennials eventually become overcrowded and require division. Many times, the center portion of the plant becomes bare as they spread. In that case, digging them up every couple of years and dividing them is the best way to get new plants for expanding your own garden or, even better, sharing them with friends. The division can be done with two garden forks, or a spade, or sometimes they can be teased apart with bare hands.

Divisions should contain three to five shoots or growing points. Go for the healthiest ones, discarding any weak or diseased portions. Keep them moist and out of direct sun until you can get them back in the ground. The time to divide perennials can vary, but is most often early spring or early fall when the foliage starts to lose its color. In general, plants that flower in spring are best divided in fall while those that flower late are best divided in the early spring. However, divisions can be done when most convenient if special care is provided afterward, such as shading, watering and mulching the new plants.

Most perennials can be divided, but a few are best left alone once they mature. These include monkshood (*Aconitum*), blue false indigo (*Baptisia*), gas plant (*Dictamnus*), baby's breath (*Gypsophila*), sea holly (*Eryngium*), statice (*Limonium*), Oriental poppy (*Papaver orientale*) and Carolina lupine (*Thermopsis*).

Stem and Root Cuttings Many perennials can also be started from stem cuttings (also called tip cuttings or slips) or even pieces of root. Using division,

stem cuttings and root cuttings to form new plants is called vegetative propagation, or cloning.

Take tip cuttings from the ends of non-flowering lateral shoots. Cut pieces three to four inches long, ensuring that each cutting has at least three nodes (leaf joints). Place these cuttings in a pot of seed starter mix and keep moist. Label the pot and cover with a plastic bag with a few holes for ventilation. When roots form, place these new plants in individual pots. Overwinter the cuttings in a cold frame or greenhouse and plant them in the garden next spring.

Root cuttings are best done in late winter when plants are dormant. Cut thick or fleshy roots into two to three inch pieces. Place pencil-thick pieces vertically two inches apart in seed-starting media, or potting mix. Cover with ¼ inch of media and keep moist.

Place thinner root pieces horizontally in media and keep moist. When they sprout and grow two or three sets of leaves, transplant them to individual pots. Allow them to grow in a cold frame or in the house until sturdy enough to plant out in the garden.

Seed Propagation Many perennials can also be grown from seed. If collecting your own seed from a cultivated variety, be aware that there will be variation in any new plants. That is because many of our cultivated varieties (cultivars) are hybrids of the original plant. Seeds collected from hybrids will grow seedlings that may be different and possibly inferior to the parent plants. Consider purchasing seed from a reputable seed company to ensure purity.

Consider also the way plants grow from seed in nature. Perennials drop seeds at different times throughout the growing season. These seeds may sprout almost immediately or they may need a cold period before they can germinate. In that case, they won't come up till the next spring. So, when you sow seeds, sow them generously, cover them and label them so you won't forget where they are. Don't rely on memory. Many garden projects have failed because of a lapse in memory; I know that firsthand.

Virginia is fortunate to have many excellent commercial growers of perennials. Consult them or your local Extension office for further information. Also, there are a number of good books on perennials that go into more detail than I can here. Consult your local library, favorite bookstore or the Internet.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services